



## Research article

# Perceptions of general and parenting-specific posttraumatic change among postpartum mothers with histories of childhood maltreatment<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

Although adaptive meanings of childhood maltreatment (CM) are critical to posttraumatic adaptation, little is known about perceptions of posttraumatic change (PTC) during the vulnerable postpartum period. PTC may be positive or negative as well as global or situational. This study examined general and parenting-specific PTC among 100 postpartum women with CM histories ( $M_{age} = 29.5$  years). All reported general and 83% reported parenting PTC. General PTC were more likely to include negative and positive changes; parenting PTC were more likely to be exclusively positive. Indicators of more severe CM (parent perpetrator, more CM experiences) were related to parenting but not general PTC. Concurrent demographic risk moderated associations between number of CM experiences and positive parenting PTC such that among mothers with more CM experiences, demographic risk was associated with stronger positive parenting PTC. Results highlight the significance of valence and specificity of PTC for understanding meanings made of CM experiences.

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## 1. Introduction

Making meaning of childhood maltreatment (CM) experiences can result in altered views of the self, others, relationships, and the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1995; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Park, 2010), which we collectively refer to as posttraumatic changes (PTC; Simon, Smith, Fava, & Feiring, 2015). Although adaptive meanings of CM are crucial to posttraumatic adaptation (Cohen, Mannarino, & Deblinger, 2006; Collins & Laursen, 2004), perceptions of maltreatment-related PTC may be positive (e.g., enhanced personal strength) or negative (e.g., viewing others as untrustworthy). Moreover, PTC are open to modification across developmental and life experiences (Harvey, Mishler, Koenen, & Harney, 2000). The current study examines PTC during the transition to motherhood, a time when many revisit their childhood maltreatment experiences (Seng et al., 2013).

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Relatively little is known about how new parents perceive the changes experienced in relation to CM. Prior work demonstrates that adolescents and young adults with CM histories experience PTCs in their general views of the self, others, and world as well and that these changes are related to psychosocial adjustment (Simon et al., 2015). The current study adds to this work by examining PTC that are specific to parenting. How mothers view themselves as parents or their parenting has implications for parenting behavior and the quality of parent–child relationships. Mothers with CM histories may lack confidence in their abilities to regulate their emotions within their relationship with their child (Cole, Woolger, Power, & Smith, 1992), be a good parent, or experience the parent–child relationship positively (Milan, Lewis, Ethier, Kershaw, & Ickovics, 2005). On the other hand, some mothers perceive prior CM experiences as lessons for positive parenting, even in the face of negative changes in general core views (Wright, Crawford, & Sebastian, 2007). By articulating the nature of new mothers' general and parenting-specific PTC, we sought to identify the types of PTC most salient to postpartum mothers with CM histories. Such information can provide important insights about how mothers process CM experiences and potential intervention targets for this vulnerable population.

### 1.1. The development of posttraumatic changes (PTC)

Posttraumatic changes are alterations in views of the self, relationships, or world that result from efforts to make meaning of CM experiences (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2005; Park, 2010; Simon et al., 2015). Such changes may be either positive or negative. Examples of positive changes include perceptions of improved personal strength, coping, and ability to protect oneself from danger (changes in views of self); of increased intimacy, empathy, and support (changes in relationship views), or of greater appreciation for life, increased spirituality, and enhanced sense of purpose (changes in world views; Easton, Coohy, Rhodes, & Moorthy, 2013; McMillen, Zuravin, & Rideout, 1995; Shakespeare-Finch & de Dassel, 2009; Wright et al., 2007). However, CM may also challenge core beliefs in ways that lead to perceptions of negative change in the self (e.g., being unworthy of love), relationships (e.g., others are untrustworthy), or the world (e.g., the world is unjust; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph & Linley, 2005).

To date, research on PTC has focused on positive change (e.g., posttraumatic growth) with little attention to perceptions of negative change or the co-occurrence of positive and negative changes. A handful of studies suggest that many youth and adults report both growth and costs from CM experiences (McMillen et al., 1995; Simon et al., 2015). For instance, one might experience increased personal strength but also negative changes in trust of relationship partners. In a study of youth with sexual abuse histories, participants reported more negative than positive PTCs, but approximately half reported both positive and negative changes (Simon et al., 2015). Further, youths' perceptions of positive and negative PTC showed unique relations with psychosocial adjustment. The current study extends prior work focused on sexual abuse to articulate the co-occurring positive and negative changes experienced by women during the transition to motherhood.

### 1.2. The transition to motherhood and meanings made of childhood experiences

Reflecting upon one's own childhood and experiences of being parented is common during the transition to motherhood (Cohen and Slade, 1999; Stern, 1995). For women with CM histories, revisiting these experiences might prompt renewed consideration of the meanings of these experiences for general as well as parenting specific views of the self, relationships, and world. Such contemplation might provide an opportunity to restore meaning in life, or renew hopefulness but might also raise concerns about oneself as a competent parent, the parent–child relationship, or more general views about parenting (Banyard, 1997; Seltsman & Wright, 2013; Seng et al., 2013; Wright, Fopma-Loy, & Oberle, 2012). In this way, CM may shape both general and parenting-specific models of the self, others, and the world (Park, 2010). Yet, we know very little about parenting-specific PTC among new mothers with histories of CM, including the extent to which parenting PTC mirror more general changes in the self, relationships, or world views.

In one of few studies to examine mothers' meaning-making of CM, roughly half of the mothers surveyed reported some perceived benefit from their abuse experience (Wright et al., 2007). The most frequently reported gains were in coping skills (43%), relationships (37%), and parenting skills (30%). However, when asked to specify meanings made from the abuse, 29% of mothers were unable to give any response or identify any meaning, suggesting that such direct queries in a survey format may be difficult. Of those who responded, 19% reported a mix of positive and negative meanings. No mothers reported negative meanings related to parenting; however, about 32% reported negative changes in views of the self, relationships, or the world.

The current study adds to this literature by examining general and parenting-specific perceptions of positive and negative changes among new mothers with histories of various forms of CM (i.e., physical, sexual, emotional abuse or neglect). Consistent with prior work, we assessed perceptions of PTC using a semi-structured interview that inquires about maltreatment experiences, reactions, and effects over time. Narratives are uniquely suited for studying how individuals make meaning of traumatic experiences because they provide a window into speakers' internalized life stories (McAdams and McClean, 2013). When freely relating their CM experiences, individuals reveal the heart of meaning making - the constructive process by which they evaluate past CM experiences in light of current conditions (Riessman, 1993; Singer, 2004). For the current study, the narratives were used to assess the strength and valence of both general and parenting PTCs. Although general PTCs appear to be present as early as adolescence (Simon et al., 2015), parenting PTC may not be known or internalized before motherhood, at which time mothers more seriously contemplate the meanings of CM experiences for emergent views of

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